A COELACANTH IN KENYA WATERS?

MR. G. F. CARTWRIGHT, of Salisbury, writes :

"In October and November of last year I spent a holiday at Malindi in Kenya. You were conducting research work at Casuarina Point and I met your wife on the beach one day as I and several others returned from hunting under water, when she examined our catch, which included a large porcupine fish.

"I occupied myself a great deal in goggle fishing and hunting under water and consider that I saw most of the fish in the area, for I visited a great number of coral reefs in the area and was not an infrequent visitor to the fish cold storage and fish market. I also went out when the tide had turned and encountered manta rays, and, on one occasion, two sharks. The deep-sea fish appeared to come in then towards the fishing village area, presumably seeking the offal of goats and turtles killed there. Why I mention all this is to indicate that I gained a fair knowledge of the various types of fish, and I found that most of them did not appear to carry scales but were of smooth appearance, or the scales were light.

"One day I had swum out with my harpoon gun. I looked down into the water and just below my sand-shoed foot I saw a large fish. It was heavily built and probably weighed from 100 to 150-lbs. I thought how just too comfortably my foot would fit into its mouth. It was totally unlike any other fish I had seen or saw afterwards. It looked wholly evil and a thousand years old.

"It had a large eye, and the most distinguishing feature was the armour-plated effect of its heavy scales — scales so heavy that it was set quite apart from all other fish I saw. It had a baleful and ancient appearance and was a dull, dark grey. I decided that I would attempt a head shot and with luck might secure the fish. My gun was not quite as powerful as it might have been as it had only two rubbers. Nevertheless, I had caught quite a considerable number of fish. On this occasion the harpoon struck the fish but did not penetrate. The fish cleared.

"I made quite a number of inquiries from persons resident in Malindi as to what kind of fish it might be I had seen. Someone said that it was probably a large rock cod, and I accepted this, presuming that it was a different species to the type of fish we found amongst the coral reefs, which we termed rock cod.

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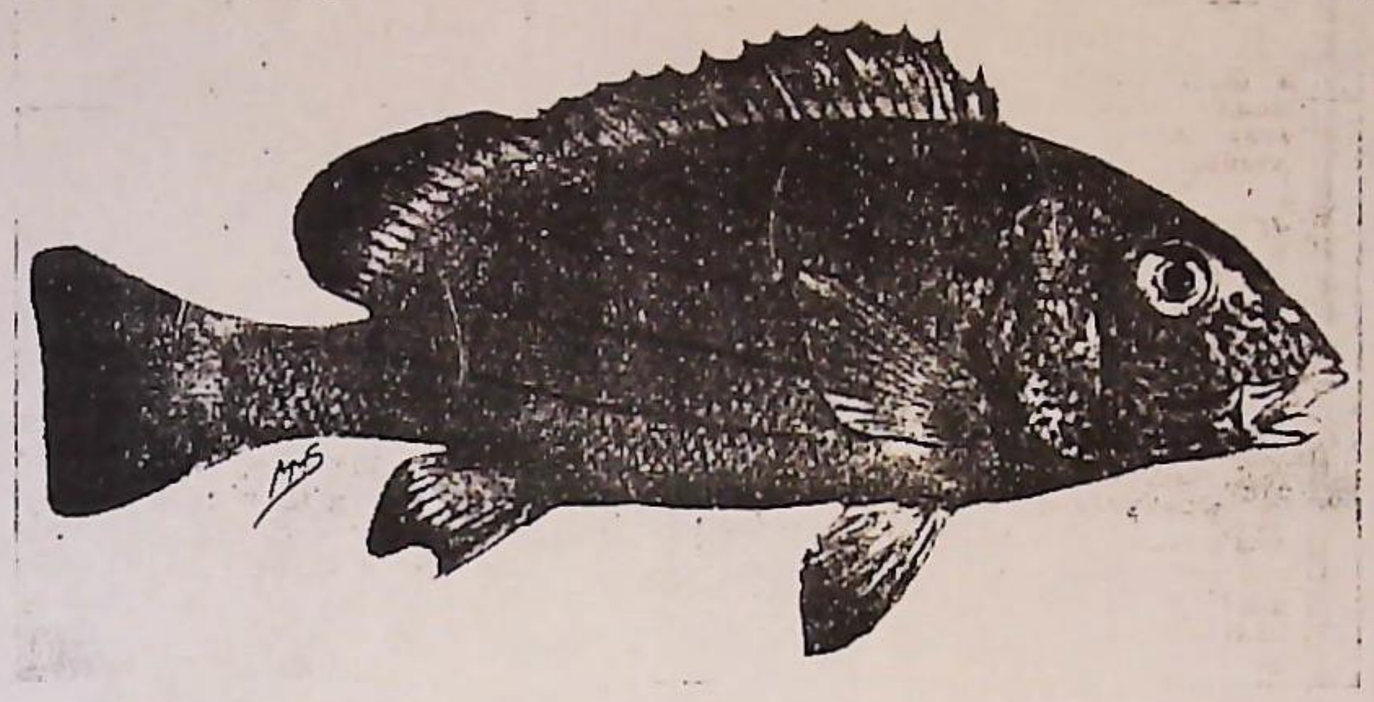
WILL NATAL AND ZULULAND ANGLERS WATCH FOR THIS FISH



This is GATERIN BAILEYI, one of Professor Smith's discoveries during his expedition to Kenya and Zanzibar last year. It is a most striking addition to the Family PLECTORHYNCHIDÆ. It was once considered that the headquarters of this family lay in the East, but Professor Smith's investigations of our East Coast have shown that we have a surprising number of species of our own, several of them found only in African waters.

The fish shown here frequents shallow waters near the shore and in estuaries, and it is not at all unlikely that it will ultimately be found in Natal or Zululand. It may immediately be recognised by the peculiar sloping narrow dark stripes, and by the brief description which follows :

Depth about 3. D XIV 16. A III 7. 54 Tubular scales in lateral line. Tr.9/23. 14 Gill rakers. Silvery dusky, with six narrow forwardly-sloping black lines. Attains 24 inches. Excellent eating.

Will anyone who comes across this fish in our waters make every effort to get it to Professor Smith or at least to photograph and report it.

COELACANTH EXPEDITION POSTPONED

In a special message to the "South African Angler" Professor Smith writes :

"As has already been stated in the daily Press, owing to a series of circumstances beyond our control, it has been reluctantly decided to abandon the contemplated Coelacanth expedition during the present year.

"There have been certain new developments which are at present being considered in relation to the organisation of an undertaking of similar but greater scope for 1954, about which information will be released as soon as it becomes possible.

"In the meantime we have communicated directly with every person and every firm who have kindly given or promised assistance, and we wish to record our great appreciation of the fact that in almost every case the donors have requested us to retain their contributions for future use. Those who held promised goods and material in readiness, have all assured us that we may count on the same support in any future venture.

"For all this we wish to express our sincere appreciation."

CONTRIBUTIONS

Professor Smith wishes to acknowledge the following donations : Alexandria & District Angling Club, £3 3s. 0d.; Mr. P. J. van der Walt, Kubuta, Swaziland, £2 2s. 0d.

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A COELACANTH IN KENYA WATERS ?

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These were smallish, up to about 6-lbs., lay idly on the bottom or on rocks, were black, brown or yellow with brown speckles and had wide mouths, as wide as their bodies. The fish I saw had no resemblance to these, for their scales did not show.

"I had read your notice concerning the Coelacanth, which bore no picture or description of the fish, and I had seen a plaster cast of the fish in 1950 at the Coryndon Museum in Nairobi. The cast was small and white and looked more like a fossil fish than a possible live one. Neither of these sources conveyed much information to me. As I said before, this fish conveyed the impression of being a thousand years old and I jokingly said it might be a Coelacanth. That it might be, of course, I considered quite ridiculous if only one had been caught before, and presumed that it had been hauled to the light of day from an incredible depth at the bottom of the ocean.

"However, some little time after my return from holiday I saw a picture of the Coelacanth you obtained, with yourself and Captain Hunt in the picture. I was struck by the likeness between this fish and the one I had seen. It was stated, however, that your fish was a bright blue. The one I saw was a dull dirty grey. Colours are lost when the water is churned up but as far as I can recall the day I was fishing visibility was good and moreover the fish lay below me only a short distance from my foot, so I had an excellent opportunity to study it — including its malevolent demeanour. As it was below me, I could not study its three sets of fins formation but had a good look into its eye.

"Recently I visited the Rhodes Centenary Exhibition in Bulawayo and made a special point of checking up on the plaster model of the coelacanth there, and took care to stand in front of the fish and look downwards from the front into its eye. This has practically convinced me that the fish I saw was a Coelacanth or very much like one. However, there may be a fish, perhaps the large rock cod, which is also very similar to the Coelacanth and it was one of these I saw.

"Would you kindly advise me if you know of any fish which would correspond to the description I have given of the fish I saw? If it should have been a Coelacanth I could give you information as to exactly where I saw it."

Professor Smith replies :

"There are not many fishes on the East Coast of Africa which attain the size of 100-lbs., and of those that do that are known to be in that area, there is not one which agrees with your description nearly as well as the Coelacanth.

"It is not likely from your description that the fish was a Rock Cod. Large Rock Cods do not have big eyes, and no Rock Cod has scales of the type you mention. None of the other fishes that grow to a large size fit your description except the Coelacanth. In the matter of colour, I do not recollect that it was ever said that the fish was a bright blue. The one at East London was said to have been blue, but it was brown when I saw it, and the one at the Comoros also was brown by the time I got there. You can deduce the live colours in a dead fish, especially if it has big scales, by carefully pulling out scales and looking underneath the skin, and in the Comoran Coelacanth this indicated a blue-grey rather than a bright blue. So your fish, having been a greyish colour is not incompatible with its having been a Coelacanth.

"During the past six months, among the enormous numbers of letters we have received from all over the world, have been some giving information about strange fishes which people consider may have been Coelacanths, and indeed some of them are most interesting. I should not be surprised if Coelacanths are eventually discovered over a great area of the oceans.

"During the past few months a good many people seem to have gained the idea that Coelacanths occur only in French waters, but this is not true, for it should not be forgotten that the first was, after all, found near East London, and I have reasonably good evidence that one at least was caught in Portuguese East African waters. Indeed, now that our main expedition to the north has been cancelled, I shall probably be going up to Portuguese East Africa this month to carry out a survey based on the shore. You never know what this may yield.

"In the meantime if you go again to Malindi or anywhere along there this year, you will doubtless make sure to have a good strong harpoon gun. If you do get a Coelacanth, please get it straightaway to the cold storage. Mr. Bailey has a deep-freeze at Malindi, as well as a much larger deep-freeze store at Mombasa, and he would certainly give you every assistance.

"I shall go on hoping that you will see and catch a Coelacanth. Any size will do."

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